

ARTICLES

"Thy Neighbor's Ghost: Ideal Types, Stereotypes, All Types"

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This essay argues that biblical polemics against “necromancy,” though generally inaccurate as descriptions of customs for communication with the dead, nevertheless tell us two things which would otherwise be difficult to discern without comparative evidence. The first is that biblical characterizations about Mesopotamian funerary cult were not whole cloth fictions but built from knowledge—however incomplete and tendentious—of actual practices. Evidence from omens, rituals, and exorcisms gives body to a sense that Babylonians indeed “talked” to the dead, the basis from which cultural stereotypes about “necromancy” could be appropriated and elaborated. The second point is that a full appraisal of the range of practices relating to the care and feeding of the dead in Mesopotamia, while it suggests no “necromancy,” shows that there was less stability to this fraught and contested corner of social life than has generally been acknowledged. Simple declarations that *kispum*-cult was “the Mesopotamian way of dealing with death” must give way to a recognition of heteropraxy at both the household and institutional level.

Kerry Sonia’s book, properly suspicious of categories, breaks apart the conflation of family cult with “necromancy” made by the Hebrew Bible and adroitly reassembles the parts to illustrate vital and shared dimensions of ancient Near Eastern cultural life. That this can be done via a critical approach to polemics can make a scholar of Mesopotamia more than a little jealous: virtually none of the prohibitions so pervasive in the Hebrew Bible are to be found in Mesopotamian sources. This means that we have little access to notions of orthodoxy and apostasy which might give shape to inner-cultural precepts and their contestation.

Here, I will leverage some of Sonia’s ideas to show how her comparative approach brings us to two realizations about Mesopotamian relations with the dead which might otherwise be hard to make. Both rely on questions about comparative method and the stability of categories. The first insight is that an image of “necromancy” as a Mesopotamian craft (inasmuch as the biblical sources imply it to have been a foreign art) could only have been derived as a cultural stereotype, appropriated for polemical purposes, since the evidence for its practice in Mesopotamia itself is dubious. The second is how heteropractic Mesopotamian veneration of the dead really was: it included such a vast array of ritual acts that we must be re-balance the typical and the atypical to avoid reifying ideal types or normative practices as exclusively authentic.

Mesopotamian “Necromancy” in the Hebrew Bible: A Case of Stereotype Appropriation

The first point I want to make is that the “necromancy” implied by the Hebrew Bible to have been Mesopotamian in origin is not substantially attested in the home culture. For this reason, we need to think through the reasons for and

implications of the suggestion that it was. Comparisons of any kind need the entities being compared to be relatively stable. So apart from the welcome distinction Sonia makes between necromancy and cult for dead kin, it is fair to ask how coherent Mesopotamian “necromancy” really was, whether identified as such by modern scholars or implied by biblical texts.¹ Much, of course, depends on definitions. I expect of necromancy that it be a summoning forth of the dead to undertake action on behalf of the petitioner. Sonia applies a less stringent standard, that petitions need only be “requests for privileged information.” She recognizes necromancy as a rare concept in Mesopotamian culture, but understands it to be diachronically persistent, adducing nine points of evidence for the practice ranging from the Old to the Neo-Babylonian periods.² In most instances, however, either no privileged information is sought (points 1, 4, 6, 9) or it is the gods alone who can act as intercessors to inquire of the dead rather than human necromancers (points 2, 5, 7–8). And only in the first of the nine examples is the ritualist called a *mušelû etemmi*, “necromancer.”

This leads one to wonder how clear the translations of the term really are. If we a priori accept that the term *mušelû etemmi*—where *etemmi* unambiguously means “ghost,” “dead spirit,” or the like—plainly meant “necromancer,” then we might accept that it designated a profession and therefore regular practice having to do with “caring for the dead” and its conceptual coherence. Sonia indeed gives due critical attention to the translations of *mušelû etemmi*, *ša etemmi*, and *mušelitum* (with both male and female forms are attested) as “necromancer” and to the activity of *šūlû ša etemmi* as the “raising of a ghost.” But the meanings of these Sumerian and Akkadian terms are hardly clear at all. In the first place, these professional names are only attested in a few lexical lists (viz., *hAR.gud* = *imrû* = *ballu* and versions of Lu; see [Table 1](#)) with the exception of a single (and typically cryptic) Sumerian proverb: “The muš-barley is reserved for the ‘necromancer’” (*še muš₅ nig₂-gig lu₂-gidim-ma-ka*). Otherwise, we do not find “necromancers” textually attested outside of lexical lists in any other genre—not in letters, literature, incantations, administrative texts, etc.—either in Sumerian or Akkadian. The concept therefore possibly only existed as a theoretical elaboration by scribes in bilingual lexical lists explaining Sumerian terms which Akkadian-speaking scribes did not always understand well in the first place. Looking closely at the eight attestations in these lists, the Sumerian equivalent of *mušelû etemmi* was twice given with the equivalent *lúgidim* (lit., “ghost man”), but in at least one instance with the further equivalent *manzazu*, a “courtier.” In another instance, *mušelû sillî* is equated with *lú.GIŠ.MI.è.dè*, the front half of which means “man of shades/spirits,” while *è.dè* ambivalently suggests either “removing, going out” or

¹ Sonia is fully aware that the question needs asking. See, for example, Kerry Sonia, *Caring for the Dead in Ancient Israel*, ABS 27 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2020), 93 n. 62 and 108.

² Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 108–25.

Table 1. Attestations of *mušelû etemmi* / *mušelītum* in Mesopotamian lexical lists

Lu II iii 27'	lú.balag.gá	=	<i>mu-še-lu-ú[e-tim-me]</i>
Lu Excerpt I 183	[lú.balag.gá]	=	[<i>mu-še-lu-ú</i>] <i>e-tim-me</i>
OB Lu A 357 C ₄ 4	lú.sag.bulug.[g]a	=	<i>mu-še-[l] e-[te₄]-mi</i>
Hg. B IV 149	lú.sag.bulug.ga	=	<i>mu-še-lu-u e-tim-mu</i>
OB Lu C ₄ 6	lú.GIŠ.MI.è.dè	=	<i>mu-še-li ši-el-li</i>
Lu Excerpt II 19	SAL.IGI.ŠID.e _x (DU ₆ +DU).e.dè	=	<i>mu-še-li-tum</i>
OB Lu A 356	lú.gidim.ma	=	<i>ša e-[t]i-[im]-mi</i>
Hg. B VI 148	lú.gidim.ma	=	<i>šá e-tim-mu</i>
			= ID xxx
			= man-za-zu-ú

“bringing in, raising.” In two cases, *mušelû etemmi* is written as lúbalag (“lamentor” [of the dead]) as opposed to a necromantic ritualist.³ The meaning of the Sumerian in the remaining three instances is entirely opaque,⁴ including lúsag.bulug, with the possible literal meaning of “master of the boundary” (a.o.). Neither can the terms be easily understood as related to others listed adjacently. These sections of the lists include other ritualists such as the “dream interpreter” (*mupaššir šunātim*) and the “inquirer” (*šá’ilum*). But those crafts do not have to do with the dead, and other adjacent listings also include “ill person” (*saršum*) and “fire-lighter” (*munappibum*), so the context is hardly illuminating. On the Sumerian side, therefore, we have to admit that we hardly whether *mušelû etemmi* means “ghost man,” “lamentor,” “courtier,” or “boundary master,” or what such a person might do.

When we turn to etymology, the situation is not much better. First of all, without *etemmu*, the words *mušelû* / *mušelītum* alone may mean many things: “winnower,” “doorkeeper,” a plow, a stick or strap, a kind of cloud formation, or a part of a lock for a door or canal. This is not to say that the term possibly meaning “necromancer” cannot be distinguished where it appears with *etemmu* (“spirit, ghost”), only that little in the semantic range of *mušelû* clarifies what it means when one does it to a ghost. Neither does the root verb *šūlû* help much: it is a causative form of *elû*, with the semantic basis of “to go up.”⁵ So far, so good; but *šūlû* in independent use never refers to ghosts. Sonia follows Brian Schmidt in acknowledging the ambivalence of the verb,⁶ since it can just as easily mean “remove” as to “raise” or “summon” and this of course would change rather substantially what we understand a *mušelû etemmi* to do: i.e., that perhaps s/he expelled rather than raised dead spirits (cf. the Sumerian

3 Note the pairing of lamentations (*sipittu*) with *kispū/kasāpu*.

4 In two instances with lúsag.bulug and once (for the feminine equivalent *mušelītum*) with SAL.IGI.ŠID.e_x(DU₆+DU).e.dè. Neither term can be properly decoded without circular reference to *mušelû etemmi* itself.

5 Cf. *šá’ilu/šá’iltu*, “diviner” (lit. “inquirer”), from *šálu* A, “to ask”; despite CAD’s alternative translation as “necromancer,” there is little to suggest that their mode of inquiry related to consultation with the dead aside from their listing near the *mušelû etemmi* in lexical lists. Note that the *šá’ilātim* appearing in Sonia’s point 3 (here, “dream-interpreters”) are consulted in list *alongside* diviners and ghosts; the ghosts are not consulted by the *šá’ilātim* (Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 112–13).

6 Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 109; Brian B. Schmidt, “The ‘Witch’ in En-Dor, 1 Samuel 28, and Ancient Near Eastern Necromancy,” in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki, RGRW 129 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 118 n. 25.

lú.GIŠ.MI.è.dè mentioned above). This ambiguity gets worse, however, since the verb can also mean “to dedicate (to),” (though only in reference to a deity, not to the dead). In all, it is impossible to find the semantic center of gravity tilting either towards or away from a sense of necromancy. But the real problem is that none of the four senses of *šūlū* is ever used in connection with dead people or spirits.⁷

In fact, the sense of “raising” the dead is the one most easily excluded: the verb is never used to refer to a human body or person, whether mantically or somatically (e.g., to “raise” someone from illness, sleep, or injury). So although an understanding that a *mušelū etemmi* “raises” the dead may be idiomatically attractive in English, the verb does not convey this sense in Akkadian.⁸ We would more likely see verbs like *balātu* (“to restore” life) or *petū* (“to open” a grave) to convey a summoning of the dead—but again these turn out to be verbal idioms never used in connection with necromancy. I note also that there is no Akkadian *mušelūtu*, no abstract-categorical “art of necromancy,” in the way that there is *bārūtu* or *āšipūtu* for the divinatory and medical arts. None of this is to say that some literary and ritual sources did not mean to depict or induce necromantic encounters of exactly the kind Sonia proposes—indeed, necromancy may be the purpose lying behind some ritual procedures which do not overtly indicate it at all—only that what is strongly indicated by the evidence as “dead-raising” was a very rare theoretical concept which cannot be made coherent through context, semantics, or etymology.

What is most remarkable, in fact, is that this near-absence of evidence for necromancy persists across space and time: the lexical lists which give virtually the only (and highly equivocal evidence) for necromancers were copied many, many times by scribes from the early second- to the mid-first millennium BCE, in both Babylonia and Assyria; and yet, the term *mušelū etemmi* was never used in any other context. This must give us some pause, since almost anything we might say of “Mesopotamian” culture usually requires qualification that it was truer or less true in some given region or period, or that certain concepts are in evidence in one genre but not another. But we simply never see a robust Mesopotamian tradition of summoning forth the dead for information or action developing at any point, anywhere, or in any kind of textual tradition, despite the concept being lexically available. At most, we can only state that the concept was somehow important in the context of the composition of the Old and Middle Babylonian lexical lists where the term *mušelū etemmi* appears. Instead, as I discuss below, there is vastly more evidence for a Mesopotamian ritual environment in which mantic energy was consistently geared towards driving ghosts *away*.

⁷ The narrative work “The Descent of Ištar” does use G-stem *clū* in the sense of the dead “ascending” to earth from the Netherworld, but not *šūlū*, that they were “raised.”

⁸ The same goes for a *šā'ilu/šā'iltu*, sometimes translated “necromancer,” where the root verb is *šālu*, “to ask,” and not *šūlū*, “to raise.”

Thus, although I endorse Sonia's intuition that the scattered evidence does not "need to be synthesized into a single coherent system of cultic practices,"⁹ I want to pursue more aggressively the positive analytic implications of *incoherence*. What does that mean? That practices which are real but formally scattered do give evidence of a kind, but evidence of cultural beliefs *in contest*: not about a certainty of the nature of relations between the living and the dead, but for the inchoate feelings of guilt and fear associated with the death of loved ones; for the emotional and social uncertainty produced when the permanence of death was called to answer for the ambiguous and unstable future. That those scattered forms are also spottily attested speaks to a reluctance for ad hoc attempts to speak with the dead to ever resolve into standard or professional practices of mantic communication. The Mesopotamian evidence, such as it is, speaks most strongly to uncertainty and reluctance about such matters.

So I suggest that what the biblical sources call "necromancy" (i.e., as *ha'ōbōt wəhayyiddə̄ōnîm*) was not any articulated body of knowledge or beliefs in ancient Mesopotamia, but a caricature on the part of the biblical writers of received ideas about neighboring Near Eastern societies, used as a foil against which to propagate the Yahwistic cult. This is the well-known phenomenon of stereotype appropriation, where an exaggerated or distorted version of the traditions of Others are given weight as authentic (but bad), to help construct an image of the (good) Self.¹⁰ The use of a "necromancy" stereotype does not require us to believe that the biblical writers actually understood Mesopotamian practices well and represented them accurately, or even that those practices ever existed in the form they were understood to. Rather, all that was necessary was to construct a foil against which an ideal form could be shaped. The biblical representation is a pastiche made up of fragments of real practice, errant notions of function, transference, and sheer misunderstanding; the purpose of asserting its validity and reality was, as it was with "idolatry," polemical.

Where might biblical notions of a Mesopotamian "necromancy" have come from? That is, through what means could biblical writers have known the minimum amount necessary to have successfully misrepresented it? I suspect this knowledge may have derived not only from *kispum-* and *kispum*-adjacent memorial/funerary practices, but from what they might have known of other Mesopotamian knowledge texts as well. This might have included a general knowledge of terrestrial omens, for instance, in which chirping and chittering ghosts sometimes appear (although it was much to the point for Babylonians

⁹ Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 127.

¹⁰ Sonia discusses "the negative portrayal of necromancy in the Hebrew Bible and its association with allegedly foreign cult" (*Caring for the Dead*, 68–69 n. 7).

texts that those communications were *per se* incoherent and unintelligible).¹¹ Dead spirits also appeared in medical prognoses and diagnoses texts, where “seizure by a ghost” (*sibit etemmi*) and “hand of a ghost” (*šu gidim*) were considered remediable conditions (though they were in no way understood as communications or theologically freighted to Mesopotamian readers; they were simply afflictions). An entire Babylonian corpus of ghost prescriptions existed as well: the arts of “exorcism” (*āšipūtu*). Some incantations in this series directly addressed ghosts in the second person (e.g., “You are indeed evil...”), but dead spirits were mostly spoken of in the third person, and nothing indicates that the effectiveness of the incantatory language required that the ghosts themselves understood or participated in the rituals (the purpose of which were, to be clear, to get rid of the spirits, not to talk to them). In such ways, even though various Mesopotamian mantic practices existed to mediate between the worlds of the living and the dead, little in them entailed *communication* (one-way or two-way). In fact, most rituals indicate that the human participants had absolutely no idea of the *identity* of the dead spirit—it could be anyone from one’s mother to a complete stranger; and not only could this identity not be determined, it was seemingly unimportant, as it was never a purpose or outcome of the ritual.¹²

In all, ghosts appeared in significant numbers in many of the first-millennium Mesopotamian knowledge arts potentially knowable to the biblical authors and audience, but only (indeed: especially!) in a very general way. That is, there was enough to know that Mesopotamians had some kind of mantic contact with the dead, but it would have been quite easy to misunderstand that virtually no part of that apparatus intended to establish communication between those living and those not, let alone to any functional purpose. Instead, ghosts were (overwhelmingly) not beings to be treated with in Mesopotamia; the overwhelming attitude was that they were malevolent entities to avoid and expel. This mindset is on display in literally thousands of exorcistic, ritual, and medical texts which display consistent formal and generic convention—the whole anti-ghost science of *āšipūtu*. Why should we prefer to attend to a handful of scattered references to necromancy when so much evidence points in the other direction?

None of this is to say that Mesopotamian culture did not itself practice stereotype appropriation. The series Maqlû, for instance, a vast corpus of anti-witchcraft rituals, was developed with no evidence to show—surprise, surprise—that real “warlocks,” “witches,” or witchcraft ever existed; it may go without saying that no Mesopotamian person ever used these terms as

¹¹ See especially Tablet 19 of the series *Šumma Ālu*, ll. 44’–68’, where ghosts (Sum. *gidim*) are insistently vocal, but never intelligible: they “cry out,” “screech,” “enter the ear,” “rumble,” “growl,” and “weep,” but convey no information. Sally M. Freedman, *If a City Is Set on a Height: The Akkadian Omen Series Šumma Ālu ina Mēlē Šakin: Volume 1: Tablets 1–21*, Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund 17 (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1998), 278–81. See too, JoAnn Scurlock, *Magico-Medical Means of Treating Ghost-Induced Illness, Ancient Magic and Divination 3* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

¹² Note the widespread use of Sumerian *NENNI* in the ghost-prescription corpus to refer to ghost as “whoever (you are).”

professional titles.¹³ But this not only did nothing to prevent Mesopotamians from constructing “witches” and “warlocks” as shadowy evil figures requiring ritual action, but further from constructing them as specifically foreign agents: that there were “witches” who were *kaššāptu lullubū, sutū, qutū, hanigalbū*, and *elamū*: their evil magic was Lullubean, Sutean, Gutian, Hurrian, and Elamite. (Interestingly, only the “witch” was geographically “othered,” but not the “warlock.”)

As forms of representation, we need not accept that any Babylonian calling someone an “Elamite witch” or any biblical author calling someone a “Babylonian necromancer” shows that either “witchcraft” or “necromancy” were ever real categories of practice or experience in those home cultures. Such accusations need not indicate reality any more than *calling* someone a “Satanic pedophile,” in the parlance of QAnon ca. 2020 CE, ever identified a real phenomenon.¹⁴ These are vilifications which exist to bolster the authority of people making claims to legitimacy, not to represent objective realities. It is not, then, the accuracy of the characterizations of “necromancy” that the Hebrew Bible makes that needs our scrutiny (i.e., as Sonia puts it, “in order to establish recurring characteristics of its practice”),¹⁵ but the construction of the entire category as an instrument of polemics. Even if (and it is a heavy “if”) necromancy was an extension of mantic and memorial practices in Mesopotamia, there is little to support the idea that it was either a stable category of or recognized basis for epistemically justified knowledge in that culture.

Variety of Practice

My second point is a plea that greater attention should be paid to a great(er?) weight of evidence for heteropraxy in evidence for “care for the dead.” It is important that comparisons attend to deviations from norms as much as norms themselves. It is welcome to recognize that much of the apparatus of funerary and family cult were common-culture features shared by ancient Israel and Mesopotamia. At the same time (and following on from discussing the instability of categories), I would press for a more full-bodied construction of a non-synthesized and asystematic habitus for family cult (as well as other religious forms). I am no historian of religion, but I think here of two works from other fields. The first story comes from Barry Kemp’s 1989 *Ancient Egypt: The Anatomy of a Civilization*. This book in part argues for the development of Egypt’s “great culture” as something which became possible only by eclipsing heterodox predynastic forms. A multitude of local forms and traditions in statuary, architecture, and offertory which made late prehistoric Egypt a

¹³ “warlock”/“witch”: *kaššāpu/kaššāptu*; witchcraft, poorly attested as *kaššāpūtu*, but more commonly (and vaguely) as “works” (*ipšū*).

¹⁴ Indeed, one need not even exclude the possibility that a handful of “Satanic pedophiles” actually exist somewhere in the world to concede that they and their practices are not important forms of cultural expression representative of their or any society.

¹⁵ Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 69.

vibrant and varied world in cultic and religious terms did not survive the great centralizing orthodoxy of the dynastic world. The second story is from Carlo Ginzburg's 1976 *The Cheese and the Worms*, which centers on the account of a 16th century CE north-Italian miller named Menocchio interrogated by the Inquisition. Menocchio confessed to local pre-Christian beliefs that the cosmos had been created from a chaotic mass—"just as cheese is made out of milk"—in which the angels appeared like worms; from which God and his "captains" (including Lucifer) were also created, and then the world. Needless to say, these beliefs did not conform to church orthodoxy, and Menocchio was burned at the stake in 1599.

My point about these two stories is very basic: folk beliefs, heterodox and informal, have always existed alongside orthodox and official religions and theologies. They often remain off the radar of evidence and historical knowledge, and are sometimes revealed only by chance. This is as true for ancient Mesopotamia as for anywhere else. Thus, just as Sonida compares (Yahwistic) orthodoxy to folk practice (i.e., "family religion"), we may equally well question how representative our idea of "classic" Mesopotamian cult for the dead is. Sonia gives attention to the "five recurring components of the cult of dead kin" she sees as normative for both Mesopotamia and the Levant: food and drink offerings, monuments, invocation of names, protection of remains, and maintenance of the burial site.¹⁶ I agree that these are, indeed, the most common or even ideal elements of cult.

But let us briefly take stock of some Mesopotamian customs that vary from the five components, if only to get a sense of how rich the world of practice was. The following examples are merely extracted from the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, perhaps a cheap exercise in what has been called "CAD archaeology." But if the examples are decontextualized facts and not even representative enough to suggest structuralist interpretations, they still suggest a richness of contexts. So: Empty chairs could be set out, a bed prepared, or the body's feet washed.¹⁷ A brazier could be lit to symbolize the living family, or a pyre extinguished to symbolize its demise. A household could be filled with boughs of greenery, or a reed hut set up. Offerings might not only be for the dead, but a communal feast for the living, in the tomb. These gifts could be loaded on a little boat and sailed away down a canal. Food offerings might go well beyond bread to include fruit, spice, salt, tortoises, turtles, chaff, sheep, or mouthfuls of locust fat (yes: disgusting). Gifts other than food could be offered, including baskets, reed, wool, silver, pots, jewelry (*šukānu*), leather, or wood. A mouse could be placed in the grave, or a figurine,¹⁸ or an entire

¹⁶ Note, however, where Sonia acknowledges that the five "classic" components of *kispum* rarely appear together in any single text (*Caring for the Dead*, 29). Still, I miss a direct address of the stark contrast between Mesopotamian normative care for the dead (*paqādum*) and how often the dead are depicted in literature as lonely, forgotten, and ill-fed.

¹⁷ Note the sometime-pairing of *kispum* and *rimkum*.

¹⁸ S.v. *salmu*, buried separately or together with the deceased.

bull, wrapped in cloth and sprinkled with oil. But just as often, offerings are described in inexact terms, just as “necessities,” “rations,” “furnishings,” or “gifts.”¹⁹ Alternatively, the possessions of the dead could be burned.²⁰

When, where, and for whom was *kispum* performed? It might take place during the month Ābu—or possibly once every month through the year; from the 15th to the 29th of a month; on a specific or hemerologically-determined day; an hour after sunrise; at the disappearance of the new moon; or for “as long as the eclipse lasts.” It might be done in the household or out in the steppe, though most often the place of ritual is unspecified. I do not know of an instance where *kispum* is actually said to be performed at a *kimābu*, a grave.²¹ As for the recipients: *kispum* might be done for a family member, but also for an acquaintance, dead kings, a stranger, or unknown persons/ghosts (who might thus ritually be accounted for as family). The ritual need not even have been for people: *kispum* is attested also for “dead” canals, fallow fields, gods (including whole cohorts like the Annunaki, or ones called “captive gods,” *ilū kamūti*); for demons (notably the *utukku* who lives in the grave, and the *kūbu*, perhaps the ghost of a stillborn infant²²); for evil spirits or “dead masters”; indeed, *kispum* was used for propitiation/exorcism as well as for commemoration. Indeed, just as the identities of ghosts were often unknown (as noted above) and accounted for as family (in ritual terms), it is noteworthy that they were just as often assimilated to other supernatural entities like gods and demons; even the category “dead spirits” was not so isolable or stable. This requires us to either rethink what “social beings” were counted within the ambit of “cult for the dead” or to rethink what we think *kispum* was. Nor was *kispum* an exclusive term for cult for the dead; there were other memorial rites called *karašku*, *kisikku*, *taklimtu*, and *ki-utu-kam*.²³ *Kispum* was not necessarily an autonomous or paramount mantic art: it sometimes needed to be *validated* (why?) through other ritual procedures like *šuttu*-dreams or the *tērtum*-oracles of liver omens. And there are even some awkward lexical and orthographic aspects of the word. For instance, *kispum* (and Sum. *ki.sì.ga* [pre-Ur III]) was in earlier times only a noun and only later verbalized (*kasāpu*, “to make funerary offerings,” in Standard Babylonian²⁴)—it was a thing before it was an activity. The noun is also weirdly prone to metathesis. The word *kispu* is so often a

19 S.v. *bīšehti*, *pappasu*, *tersēti*, and *qištu*.

20 S.v. *šurupu ša šarri*, s.v. *pahāru*.

21 On non-normative burial, see my “Death and Dismemberment in Mesopotamia: Discorporation between the Body and the Body Politic,” in *Performing Death* (OIS 3), ed. N. Laneri (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 2007), 189–208.

22 See, for example, Jonathan Valk, “They Enjoy Syrup and Ghee at Tables of Silver and Gold: Infant Loss in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59/5 (2016): 695–749.

23 Old Babylonian house sale contracts also sometimes stipulated that buyers would hold an *ezen d⁴UTU* (“feast of Šamaš”), which may signal that they would propitiate household spirits through the payment of a *kispum*-like offering.

24 Sonia identifies *kispu* as “derived” from *kasāpu*, “meaning ‘to break off a piece,’ which likely refers to the breaking of bread as a food offering in this ritual,” (*Caring for the Dead*, 27). But she refers to the verb *kasāpu* A (OB, SB, NA) rather than *kasāpu* B (Mari, Elam, SB), “to present a funerary offering” (which CAD identifies as related to *kispum*). On present evidence, it is hardly clear that the two (apparently distinguishable) verbs are not in fact related or even identical, or that *kispu* is not a derived form—but also not clear that these points are true, either.

variant spelling for *kibsu*, “footsteps,” and *kupsu*, “wax,” that those erroneous writings have to be recognized at the dictionary level. It seems odd that a word so important would so commonly be miswritten as a variant spelling of other very quotidian things. The implications of these last aspects are hardly clear, but they altogether have to make us wonder how conceptually fixed the practice really was. In sum, though *kispum* clearly had the “thingness” of genuine cultural expression, it may be that it embraced a range of actions and concepts no less diverse and no more orthopractic than our own culturally-contested and variant notions of what a proper “funeral” should be.

Conclusion

It is a welcome step to put ideal types together and distinguish them from others, and to track the cultural problems for which they were mobilized. In demonstrating the domain confusion that the Hebrew Bible creates for ideas of “family cult” and “necromancy,” Sonia shows that there is no need for us to import it into scholarship by putting the claims of households and institutions into crux. This effort to deconflict realms of practice points us toward a livelier and more nuanced antiquity. But there are also two questions the work further excites: that pejorative stereotypes ask us to investigate the stability of the categories on which they depend; and that the range of deviations from ideal types ask us to imagine a wider range of microhistories and memorial purposes, to pay as much attention to heteropraxy as to orthopraxy, let alone orthodoxy. Tending to the first question helps us deconstruct the purpose and method of the invidious comparison Yahwism proposed between legitimate cult and “necromancy.” Tending to the second question allows us to see folkways built out of family customs so local as to be perhaps unrecoverable and lost to time in their specificities. The answers to these questions begin to evoke a world in which the institutionalization, policing, or erasure of family religion was not only unlikely, but very likely impossible.

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